

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alaska Early Childhood Environmental Scan & Baseline Report on the Condition of Young Children

Early childhood is a period of incredible growth and development. Early life experiences influence children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical development and directly influence the adults they will become. Positive experiences that young children have early in life help set them on the path for success in school and into adulthood. Negative or adverse experiences have the opposite effect, resulting in deficits in skills and abilities and increased health risks into adulthood, driving down productivity and quality of life, and increasing social costs. National research across disciplines has established that investments in the early years are an efficient and effective use of resources.

The All Alaska Pediatric Partnership (AAPP) commissioned the Alaska Early Childhood Environmental Scan as a first step towards identifying and prioritizing statewide needs that will enable stakeholders to better coordinate, align and integrate the services, supports and resources needed to build a stronger, more comprehensive early childhood system for all children and their families. AAPP's interest in creating a more focused approach to improving early childhood outcomes is grounded in several realities:

- Healthy and supported young children are essential for Alaska's future
- Children in Alaska are falling behind their peers nationally in health and education outcomes
- The roots of the achievement gap start well before children ever enter school
- Early interventions work, including family supports and early learning opportunities
- Investments in early childhood are cost-effective and produce large benefits to children, parents and society
- Many children and families aren't receiving the services and supports they need

As research has demonstrated the importance of early childhood for future success in school and life, there has been a steady expansion of programming aimed at young children and families, and an increased focus on health and development, and early childhood education experiences. However, while other states have recognized that there are opportunities for greater coordination, collaboration, and future cost savings by investing in early childhood systems, Alaska has been slow to make early childhood system-

building a priority, resulting in fragmentation and uneven access to services for children and families.

Research-based indicators show that young children in Alaska are at risk of poor outcomes, many of which are preventable. Identifying and tracking research-based indicators over time is important to measure trends, determine progress on statewide goals and priorities, identify and reduce disparities, and target resources to areas of highest need.

While Alaska recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be even more important to understand how the services that families depend on have been affected, and the impact on children and families' health, mental health and economic well-being. For example, some early childhood education facilities have closed, while many parents remain essential workers.¹ Whether or not all facilities will reopen has yet to be determined. Schooling has been interrupted.² Many parents have lost their jobs, access to the specialized services that their children need, and social supports which are critical for reducing stress.³ Communities that depend on itinerant providers for health care and early intervention services have seen those services reduced or shifted to tele-medicine.⁴ Visits to primary care providers for essential services such as well-child visits and vaccinations have declined.⁵ Family violence has risen.⁶ It will be important to collect data, monitor the changes, identify disparities that occur, and have a system-level response to support families through this difficult time and the recovery period that follows.

The need for a strong, coordinated early childhood system has never been more acute.

Young Children in Alaska

Alaska has more than 94,000 children age zero to eight, accounting for nearly 13% of the state population.⁷ More than 10,000 babies are born each year,⁸ and the state's fertility rate is one of the highest in the nation.⁹

More than one in ten Alaska residents is between ages 0-8

Population age 0-8 Population age 9+



Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Statistics, Population Estimates 2018

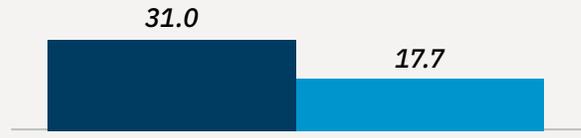
Changing demographics mean that children born today look different from the adult population; more than half of all young children identify with a race/ethnicity other than white, compared to 35% of the adult population.¹⁰ **Poverty is the single greatest threat to a child's well-being** and research shows an average family needs an income of 200% of the Federal Poverty Level to meet their basic needs.¹¹ Over one-third (36%) of young children (age 0-8) in Alaska are considered low-income.^{12,13} **Depending on where young children live in the state, there may be few resources available in their communities to meet needs for health care, nutritious food, family supports, early interventions and early childhood education,** and they may be more likely to live in poverty.

Disparities appear early. Pregnant women in Alaska receive prenatal care at a lower rate than women in the United States as a whole.^{14,15} Tobacco use during pregnancy is double the national average, and marijuana and opioid use is on the rise.^{16,17,18,19} Children on Medicaid receive preventative health care at lower rates than children nationally, forgoing opportunities to identify needed early interventions for children, as well as supports for their families.²⁰ There are just fifty pediatricians in Alaska, well below what is needed to meet the health care needs of children.²¹

Young children in Alaska are less safe than children nationally. Alaska has the highest rate of child maltreatment in the nation and young children in Alaska are more likely to die before their eighth birthday than their peers nationally.^{22,23,24} The state's ALCANLink project has shown that one-third of all Alaska children have a report of maltreatment with the Office of Children's Services before the age of eight.²⁵ The most common form of maltreatment is neglect. Neglect is present in 77% of maltreatment cases in Alaska, and is often associated with poverty, as well as caregivers who suffer from substance misuse disorders.^{26,27} Having a teen parent is also a risk factor.²⁸

Child mortality (age 1-8) is nearly double the national rate (per 100,000)

Alaska United States



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention WONDER, Detailed Mortality accessed December 2019
Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Health Analytics and Vital Records, 2019

Substantiated maltreatment reports are higher in Alaska than nationally for young children (rate per 1,000)

Alaska United States



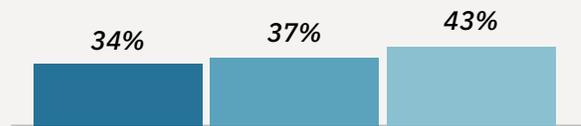
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Child Maltreatment Report, 2017

Quality early childhood education opportunities can help children start school ready, and reduce the disparities associated with poverty. However, universal access to preschool is not guaranteed for Alaska children. Many communities lack licensed child-care, and public preschool and Head Start are not available in all communities. thread estimates that 13% of Alaska families have an unmet need for care.²⁹

Only one-third of Alaska children start kindergarten "ready" and low-income children are even less likely to be ready than children who are not low-income (26% vs 40%).³⁰ By third grade, just 37% of Alaska children are proficient in English/Language Arts (ELA) assessments and 43% in Mathematics. Low-income children are less likely to be proficient. These statistics are a sober reminder of the need to bolster access to early childhood education opportunities in the state.

Just over one-third of students are kindergarten ready, and proficient in Mathematics and ELA by 3rd grade

Kindergarten ready 3rd grade ELA proficient
3rd grade Math proficient



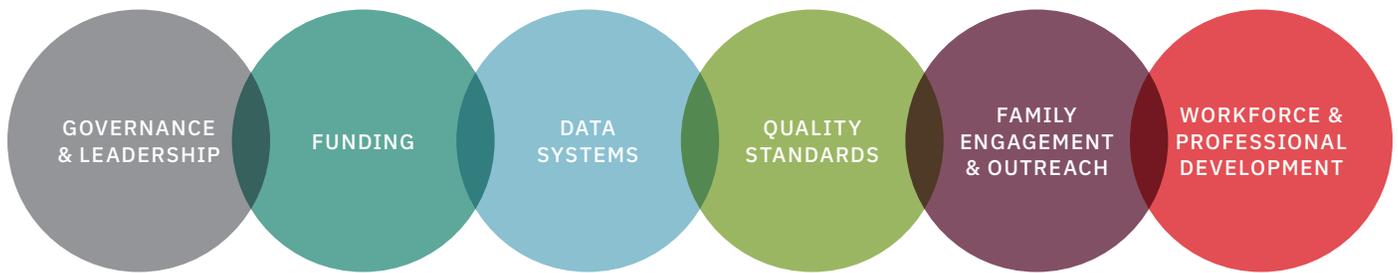
Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, Developmental Profile 2018/2019; Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools 2018/2019

Alaska's Early Childhood System

State leaders play a key role in building and sustaining an integrated system across sectors by providing the leadership, vision, and governance that brings programs and services together. Early childhood systems include early childhood education, healthcare, social services and higher education, and workforce and professional development sectors working together to encourage efficiency and innovation in the delivery of quality services and supports for young children and their families.

System components are not independent programs or services. They are linked, overlapping and mutually reinforcing pieces that when properly functioning should provide the infrastructure needed for families and young children to thrive.

Each of the pieces in the graphic below is a core component of Alaska's early childhood system.



Strengths of Alaska's Early Childhood System

Strengths of Alaska's early childhood system that can be built on include:

- Engaged stakeholders who genuinely care about children and families and want a strong early childhood system.
 - State investments of around \$11 million annually in school-based preschool and home visiting programs, as well as support for Head Start.
 - Medicaid expansion has increased access to health care for children and pregnant women, and the Medicaid 1115 Waiver increases preventative care opportunities that are known to reduce costs.
 - A solid base of high-quality data and research on young children and families from surveillance surveys and program data, as well as the ALCANLink research project which focuses on understanding the cumulative incidence of child maltreatment.
 - Several initiatives to improve the early childhood workforce, including professional development for infant and early childhood mental health, an identified need, as well as special scholarships and incentives for specialized early intervention staff, health care providers, and early childhood educators.
 - A recently launched Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS), Learn & Grow, designed to provide caregivers information about the quality of early childhood education (ECE) settings, and guide and incentivize ECE facilities to improve the quality of care they offer.
- Widespread adoption of the Strengthening Families framework, providing common language among providers who work with families to build the five protective factors.



Challenges in Alaska's Early Childhood System

For many of its accomplishments, Alaska has relied on individual programs and agencies to show leadership, rather than acting to achieve a state-level vision for how families and children should be supported. As a result, Alaska's early childhood system is fragmented, resulting in missed opportunities to act strategically, leverage and coordinate resources, and improve access to and quality of services for children and families.

Specific areas for improvement include:

- Stronger governance is needed to provide a common vision, oversight and management of the state's early childhood system and regular reporting to stakeholders.
- Political will and leadership are also needed to champion the many societal benefits of investing in young children.
- More than 85% of the spending on early childhood systems in Alaska comes from the federal government. The State invests less than 1% of general funds in early childhood, and given budget concerns, those investments are not guaranteed in the future, causing instability among service providers.
- Fiscal uncertainties are trickling into other parts of the system. For example, several degree programs at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) critical to the early childhood workforce have been cut or have an uncertain future.
- Better data and research support are needed to identify and monitor what works, as well as to answer questions about how services and supports are distributed, and which ones have the most impact on individual children and family success.
- More infrastructure is needed to monitor the investments Alaska has made in quality standards and to understand if trade-offs are being made between quality of care and access to care for some families.
- There are few efforts to engage directly with families and ensure that they are valued as their children's first teacher, as well as partners and advocates for ensuring the state's early childhood system meets their needs.
- Some areas of Alaska are consistently underserved. Despite having the highest proportion of young children in the state, the Northern and Southwestern regions have fewer services available to families, and the children who live there are more at risk for poor outcomes.

How to Use the Report

This report is a resource for policy makers, program managers, service providers and anyone who cares about Alaska's young children and families. It is not intended to

define the system as it should be, but to start a conversation about how to achieve a shared vision of healthy, thriving young children and families in Alaska.

The full report has four sections:

SECTION I: History of Early Childhood Programs & Initiatives

Identifies significant milestones in early childhood initiatives, policy changes and program developments over time in Alaska and at the federal level.

SECTION II: Alaska's Early Childhood System

Defines the elements of a high functioning early childhood system and discusses the status of each element in Alaska: Governance & Leadership, Funding, Data Systems, Quality Standards, Family Engagement & Outreach, and Workforce & Professional Development.

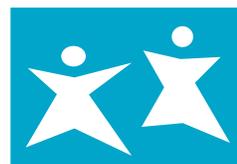
SECTION III: Status of Young Children & Families in Alaska

Identifies and reports on a set of research-based indicators that could be used to measure population-level changes over time in four areas: Demographics, Health & Development, Child Safety & Family Supports and School Readiness & Success.

SECTION IV: Regional Profiles

Shows select indicators for the seven public health regions in Alaska: Anchorage, Gulf Coast, Interior, Mat-Su, Northern, Southeast, and Southwest.

*For a copy of the full report please visit www.a2p2.org.
A list of citations is available at www.a2p2.org.*



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